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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ASHGABAT 001662

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: TURKMENISTAN: DECEMBER 25 MEETING WITH FM MEREDOV

REF: ASHGABAT 1500

Classified By: Charge Sylvia Reed Curran for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (C) SUMMARY: Deputy Chairman and Foreign Minister Rashid Meredov requested a meeting with Charge on December 25. Meredov said Turkmenistan would welcome increased visits from U.S. officials, including from Congress and other cabinet departments. Regarding the upcoming Bilateral Forum, Meredov proposed a format similar to the Turkmenistan-EU Joint Commission, where economic and energy issues are handled in a general session, but human rights is discussed in a separate meeting. Meredov promised to discuss the TASP student issue with Deputy Chairman Saparlyev to see if it can be settled. He believed that the denial of blanket approval of landings for U.S. humanitarian flights to Afghanistan could be addressed as a technical issue, and resolved. Meredov said Turkmenistan would welcome a visit from USCIRF and is prepared to discuss any topic. However, Turkmenistan wants a constructive dialogue on religion. Meredov seemed more confident than he has been in months, and consequently, more willing to try to seek resolution to controversial topics.
END SUMMARY.

12. (C) Deputy Chairman and Foreign Minister Rashid Meredov asked to meet with Charge on December 25. Meredov said back-to-back high-level visitors and travels out of the country had prevented him from meeting with her since her return from Washington. He wished her a Merry Christmas and praised her work in promoting good relations and endeavoring to resolve problems. He said the two of them should work together to promote even stronger relations between our two countries in the new year.

13. (C) Charge briefed Meredov on her recent visit to Washington and pointed out that there were outstanding issues, such as the TASP students, that were causing the relationship to sour. The sooner they were resolved, the easier it would be to put relations on a surer footing. She noted the meetings she had had on the Hill or with Hill staff, and said there could be a Congressional visit in 2010. Meredov said increased visits to Turkmenistan would be welcome, especially from Congress or other agencies/Departments. He said that it's important that relations be built not just between the two Foreign

Ministries.

ABC

14. (C) Charge said Washington wanted Meredov's thinking regarding the upcoming Bilateral Forum. Meredov said he had received our proposal of an early March date and would likely formally respond in January. His preliminary thoughts are to bring representatives from the energy complex, Institute for Democracy and Human Rights, and the Ministry of Economy. Closer to the actual dates, he would have a more concrete idea who else might attend. Regarding format, Meredov said that he thought the format used since 2004 by the Turkmenistan-EU Joint Commission worked very well. The group has met every year in Brussels and in Ashgabat. They start with a general session, and trade and energy are discussed during the general session. There is a separate, break out meeting for human rights. The entire Joint Commission lasts one or two days. Meredov underscored that the EU had proposed this format and both sides have found it to be very useful.

TASP STUDENTS

15. (C) Charge said the U.S. side is puzzled why this issue remains unresolved. The Secretary was concerned about this issue. The lack of a resolution was casting a pall on the relationship. Meredov said he also was not clear why this matter was still an issue. He knew that it had been discussed with President Berdimuhamedov (reftel), and the U.S. side had done everything that was required. He

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promised to discuss the students' issue with Deputy Chairman Saparlyev and see if this could be settled.

LANDINGS

16. (C) Charge thanked Meredov for the annual renewal of humanitarian overflight, but noted that the diplomatic note announcing the renewal did not include landings. This had come as a surprise, since it was a change of past practice. She stressed that 20-day notice for landings would not work for the U.S. side as it was impossible to plan that far in advance. The U.S. side does not know why Turkmenistan decided to make this change, but if the reason was technical, then it could be easily resolved. Meredov responded that he was almost certain that the reason was technical. He promised to get back to her within a couple of weeks. At that time, there might be a request for consultations between technical experts. He was certain this issue would be resolved.

USCIRF

17. (C) Meredov said that USCIRF had tried twice to visit Turkmenistan this fall, but it had been impossible because of timing issues on the Turkmen side. Meredov stressed religion was a sensitive issue, although progress has been made over the past few years. There are plans for further reforms, including implementing some of the changes proposed by UN Special Rapporteur Asma Jahangir. Meredov said Turkmen officials would be happy to meet with USCIRF in the coming months and possibly even during the ABC. However, Turkmenistan wants a constructive dialogue on religion. The Turkmenistan government is willing to discuss any topic, but does not want to be criticized. Charge said that USCIRF's visit to Turkmenistan in 2007 was very positive for both sides. She said the intention is to discuss issues of common concern and promote reform. The dialogue may be frank, but it would always be constructive.

18. (C) COMMENT: Meredov seemed the most relaxed that we had seen him for several months. Finally settling the gas issue with Russia may have lifted the gun he was under. He seemed like his old confident self. And a sign of his renewed

confidence was a willingness to take on a controversial topic (TASP) and perhaps push back against another Deputy Chairman. This is hopeful, but does not mean a resolution is imminent. Saparlyev is as much a bane of Meredov's existence as he is ours.

19. (C) COMMENT CONTINUED: It is unclear if the decision on landings was purely technical. However, Meredov's pronouncement makes it so, and consequently, makes it solvable. Sensible, practical, and willing to seek solutions, if he has leeway (i.e., the President hasn't already made a decision or another Deputy Chairman has not dug in his heels). It is good to have the old Meredov back. END COMMENT.
CURRAN